

Some new nesting records of padi-dwelling birds in Sabah, East Malaysia (North Borneo)

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While participating in the 1981-1983 Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology's (WFVZ) study of the distribution, taxonomy, and ecology of Sabah's birds, we discovered the nests and eggs of 4 padi and marsh birds previously unreported from Sabah. The nesting of 2 of these species (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus* and *Rostratula benghalensis*) has not previously been recorded in Borneo. The nests and eggs of the 2 other species (*Porzana cinerea* and *Gallinula chloropus*) have been found only once previously, by F. J. Grabowsky in 1882 at Bankau Lake in southeastern Borneo (Kutter 1884).

Descriptions of the nests and eggs of these birds are provided in this paper. The terms of Palmer (1962) are used to describe egg shape and colour.

CINNAMON BITTERN *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*

It is surprising that nests of this common padi bird had not been discovered previously in Borneo, because we were able to find them easily during the summers of 1982 and 1983. They were built either in the tall (c. 80 cm) grass tussocks that grow in fallow, grazed rice padi or in tall (c. 120 cm) marsh grasses. The bitterns constructed their nests by folding and weaving the inner grasses of each tussock into a sturdy platform c. 23 x 23 cm, 15-20 cm above the floor of the padi or marsh (to be above water level), lining it with dry rice grasses. A makeshift cover was formed sometimes by pulling a few outer grasses of c. 30 cm over the top of the platform. Some nests were located as close as 1.5 m from one another. One or both parents were flushed when a nest was approached.

Two nests with eggs were found on 30 August 1982 in Penampang, Sabah (a suburb of Kota Kinabalu), and 3 on 7 June 1983 in nearby Putatan. Four of the nests had 3 eggs, and one had 2. Even though all the eggs we examined were fresh or slightly incubated, different stages of nesting can occur in the same field. In Penampang, in late August 1982, we found flightless, feathered chicks hiding in the same padi where fresh eggs were to be found a few days later. The bittern eggs were always dull white, but varied in shape from elliptical to sub-elliptical to short sub-elliptical. Egg dimensions:— WFVZ #140,296 (33.9 x 26.3, 33.1 x 26.0, 35.3 x 26.2), #140,297 (34.15 x 26.65, 32.85 x 27.5, 33.6 x 27.95), #140,298 (34.2 x 26.75, 35.65 x 26.5, 34.2 x 26.65), #140, 299 (34.15 x 25.6, 34.9 x 25.4).

WHITE-BROWED CRAKE *Porzana cinerea*

Grabowsky collected one C/7 on 25 April 1882 at Bankau Lake. We found 2 nests on 24 May 1983 and 2 on 7 June 1983 at Putatan. The nesting locality was one of the few wet, fresh-water marshes left by the *El Nino* drought in Sabah, and although only 100 x 50 m, contained at least 30-40 White-browed Crakes. The nests were built in the grassy (as opposed to sedge-dominated) parts of the marsh, where the water was as much as 1.2 m deep. Their construction was the same as that of the West Malaysian deep-water nests described by Cairns (1953: 174). Reeds were bent and woven into a pad on which sat a small cup (c. 15 cm in diameter) lined with dry marsh grass.

The pad was 13-45 cm above the water and was shielded from view and the sun by surrounding grasses folded over the top (c. 40-60 cm above the platform).

The 2 nests discovered in May held, respectively, one fresh egg and 4 well-incubated eggs. The June nests contained 2 slightly-incubated and 4 well-incubated eggs respectively. The sub-elliptically shaped eggs were creamy-buff and marked heavily with fine spots and blotches of reddish-brown, especially at the large end. Egg dimensions:—WFFVZ #140,379 (29.6 x 22.8), #140,380 (27.5 x 21.15, 29.75 x 21.9, 29.5 x 21.55, 29.65 x 22.05), #140,381 (29.2 x 21.5, 30.2 x 22.05, 30.6 x 22.0, 29.95 x 21.85), #140,382 (31.2 x 23.3, 30.0 x 23.1).

COMMON MOORHEN *Gallinula chloropus*

Accounts in Smythies (1981) and elsewhere (eg. Medway 1970) give the impression that this species is uncommon. Although it may be unusual in Sarawak and may have been less abundant previously in Sabah, it is currently one of the most common large, padi and marsh birds on Sabah's west coast. We saw them often in Penampang, and recorded them in other localities as follows:—6 in the lake at Tempassok Plain, Kota Belud on 8 March 1982; 12 in padi fields at Papar on 9 September 1982; c. 20 in the Putatan marsh on 11 May 1983; c. 20 in a flooded suburban lot at Innanam on 18 May 1983. The only nesting record for this species is that of Grabowski, 25 April 1882, at Bankau Lake, where he apparently collected c. 20 eggs. (No details were given by Kutter on the number of clutches.) However, A. Lamb (in Phillipps 1982: 154) saw "fluffy brown fledglings" with their parents among marsh reeds in January 1982 at Tenom, Sabah. We found a nest at the Putatan freshwater marsh (mentioned above) on 7 June 1983. It was composed of a base formed by bent, woven marsh grasses c. 18 cm above the water. Surrounding grasses, which were from 1-1.2 m high, were pulled together, producing a well-formed enclosure, the roof of which was c. 29 cm above the base. The entrance to the nest was on the side and was 11 cm wide and 20 cm high.

The nest contained 5 eggs, all of which were almost completely incubated. They were pale buff, with widely dispersed spots and small blotches of reddish-brown, and were long sub-elliptical. Egg dimensions:—WFFVZ #140,301 (45.5 x 28.05, 45.65 x 29.1, 45.45 x 29.3, 44.3 x 31.0).

GREATER PAINTED-SNIPE *Rostratula benghalensis*

The original edition of Smythies (1960) indicated that this species was known in Borneo only from a single specimen. The latest edition of Smythies (1981), however, notes several recent sightings from Sabah by J. Q. Phillipps. We found the bird to be common in padi fields and wetlands along the west coast of the state. On 1 May 1983 we saw a male bird with 2 chicks in a fallow padi at Tuaran, and on 4 June 1983 at Mandangin (near Beaufort) we watched a male incubating eggs. His nest was located in the centre of a sparsely vegetated padi and was built of thick, brown, rotting rice grass pushed into a cup (2 cm deep) on an old Water Buffalo dung-patty. The combination of mud and dung lifted the nest, which was 8 x 8 cm, c. 10 cm above the water level.

The nest contained 4 pyriform eggs, which were pale buff, blotched and spotted with dark brown. Egg dimensions:—WFFVZ #140,351 (35.0 x 25.1).

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Subspeciation in the Afrotropical Superb Starling *Lamprotornis superbus*

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In his important pioneer study of the complex East African avifauna of over 60 years ago, van Someren (1922) states that in the Superb Starling *Lamprotornis superbus* Rüppell the average wing-length in both sexes in East Africa is 125 mm, the maximum 128 mm, ie. larger than in the case of the White Nile population. Since the publication of this brief statement, possible geographically related variation in this sturnid seems not to have been investigated in any depth by other workers. Recent research effected at the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), Tring, and in southern African centres confirms that the species exhibits significant size-variation necessitating its recognition as a polytypic species.

The Superb Starling was described in 1845 from Shoa, Ethiopia, by Dr W. P. E. S. Rüppell and ranges from the southern Sudan in Equatoria, central and southern Ethiopia and northern Somalia, south through the drier interior aspects of East Africa to reach its range limits immediately north of Lake Malaŵi. While broadly distributed in the north of its range, to the south of the Kenya/Tanzania border the starling's distribution becomes markedly attenuated west-east, and this is underscored by the finding that Tanzanian elements are longer in the wing in relation to the tail-length than in the case of the northern representatives (clearly shown in Table 1). As a result of this finding, the populations of *L. superbus* are now arranged in 2 subspecies, as hereunder presented.

The Superb Starling has for long been grouped with a range of relatively dull-coloured starlings, such as *Spreo bicolor*, *S. albicapillus* and *S. fischeri* in the genus *Spreo* Lesson, 1831 (type-species *Turdus bicolor* Gmelin), but is